

“Stepping Outside the Convent”: Leisure Participation and the Social Lives of Irish Nuns

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From as early as the 5th century, Ireland has been inexorably associated with the practice and propagation of the Christian faith. Indeed, such was their scholarly prowess and missionary zeal at that time, Irish monastics were pivotal in the re-evangelisation of Europe, and re-introduction of Latin as an ecclesiastical language. However, such devout provenance was to change following the appropriation of Ireland by English Crown from the 12th century, wherein the freedom to practice one's religion was incrementally restricted. Worse was to follow, when in pursuant of Martin Luther's Reformation thesis, the punitive enforcement of The Irish Penal Laws in 1694 ushered in the darkest of periods for Catholics in Ireland, wherein access to land, property, education and the practicing of the Catholic faith was prohibited (Bottigheimer, 1998). Moreover, merely being a member of a religious order, or being found to have harboured a religious “on the run”, was punishable by death. But while The Reformation was deemed a success in Europe, it ultimately failed in Ireland, where a combination of dogged resistance, covert religious practice, identification with the heroic hagiographies of saints and religious figures, and political interventions, resulted in the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829.

From a recruitment perspective, this forged “arrangement” facilitated quid pro quo relationships, wherein convent education became associated with the recruitment of religious sisters from the ranks of those being educated. Accordingly, while acknowledging the undoubted significance of “vocational” callings, many nuns were recruited from the “societal” classes of small farmers, shopkeepers, teachers and petty officials (Raftery, 2012), who pragmatically perceived that becoming a nun was in many cases a “better” career than having to emigrate, in that it offered employment stability, coupled with social acceptability. Indeed, having a nun in the family was considered as much a mark of distinction for the family, as it was for the young novice. However, despite the reason for becoming a nun, many young novices were bound by observance of the convent rule, with which they were expected to familiarise themselves, but which for some, may well have jarred with the onset a period of social change in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century.

Accordingly, one wonders if these young educated women, who may have been motivated by a form of romanticism, or the strong social ideals of their foundress, were socially constrained through being unable to engage with the emergence of a social and leisure environment in Ireland, where access to cultural events and holidays was actively promoted? And while there is little doubt that nuns have had significant influences in the spheres of education, health provision and caring in Ireland, O'Donoghue (2004) argues that there has been limited research into the lived experience of nuns who were overly influenced both by the discourse of vocation, and pragmatics associated with the giving of service. Similarly, in determining the predictors of life satisfaction among retired nuns, Magee (1988) contends that the opportunity to participate in cultural and avocational events were significant contributors to the achievement of a more balanced lifestyle. All of this begs a number of questions. Firstly, how successful nuns might have been at carving out social spaces within spaces that were not equal, wherein "social activity" became a space to do something away from the constraints of the religious life? Secondly, one might also ask how nuns circumvented the power of the convent? For example, were there other opportunities that satisfied their desire to travel or engage with the emerging cultural and leisure world?

To that end, as an accompaniment to what are historically preordained representations of Irish nuns as carers, teachers and fonts of spirituality, this paper will attempt to explore the degree of participation among Irish nuns in the emerging social worlds of leisure and culture. Retrospectively speaking, it will also seek to assess how they perceived its importance in the development of their own lives as nuns. Accordingly, by way of a series of interviews with religious sisters from four orders, issues pertaining to their broad engagement with the social world, were highlighting for example, their penchant for travel, where they visited, and what did they do when they got there? It also considers the restrictive environment in which they operated, and how this may have impacted on their perception of being seen, as a nun, to behave appropriately in what was an attractive social environment. Finally, as many of those interviewed were of retirement age, an opportunity was also taken to explore their retrospective views on the quality of their lives, which may or may not have been enriched by alternative social pursuits.

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